

Cicero as a Model of Insult for the
Late Roman Republic

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History 537

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November 30, 2009

The insult, it can be the crudest of human expressions or the most subtle; it can have one meaning for the addresser and another for the addressee or multiple meanings for both. The perception of an insult even being given can be questioned at times while at other times there is no doubt that the malice an insult carries is unmistakably deliberate. Some insults are not even intended, yet still perceived. How does one define an insult? Jerome Neu, a professor of humanities at the University of California, Santa Cruz and an expert on insults defines it this way: "To insult is to assert or assume dominance, either intentionally claiming superiority or unintentionally revealing lack of regard. To be insulted is to suffer a shock, a disruption of one's sense of self and one's place in the world. To accept an insult is to submit, in certain worlds to be dishonored."¹ I propose that despite Cicero's high place in history, the insults available to us in P.G. Walsh's translation of *Selected Letters* and Michael Grant's translation of *Selected Works* are representative of the insult culture of late republican Rome. With the help of Professor Neu's work on insults, I hope to show that Cicero's insults fit well within the parameters of insults today, leading us to the conclusion that Cicero and Rome should not be held in higher regard inside the realm of insults than any other periods in the western tradition. The insult at its core remained the same between Romans in the late republic much the same as it remains the same between people in other eras. Furthermore, by examining the Ciceronian sources for insults and determining their context within the nature of insults, a better understanding of the types of insults used in Cicero's day should emerge.

Cicero's reputation in his own day and in history make it easy to believe that in the art of insults just as the art of rhetoric, he was the top of the heap. This may be true, but that does not mean that others did not strive towards his example. We know that Cicero was clever, but is that any reason to think that others could not show flashes of brilliance in the way of slinging insults as well? Consider this contemporary comparison: Tiger Woods will probably go down in history as the greatest golfer of all time, but this does not hide the fact that on any given day, several duffers across the world make holes-in-ones. For the sake of argument in this examination, and because his works alone are my sole sources, Cicero will be treated as the undisputed master of insults in the last years of the Republic when he was at the height of his fame. Even if this assumption is made, it is more than likely that he is still just a dominate player at the top of a bigger game.

With this in mind, let us move on to his insults. The limitation in my sources puts us at a disadvantage in picking up on some of his insults because there are nuances, especially in his letters, that are not apparent without knowing how the people he is corresponding to have interacted with him in the past. Therefore inside jokes, casual references, and other slights do not stand out. For example when in a letter to Atticus, Cicero writes with an apologetic tone, "It was my fault, not yours, that you failed to devote days and nights to devising the necessary course of action such as could have been achieved by my meritorious conduct."² Is this a jibe referring to Atticus's laziness as perceived by Cicero or is it, as it seems by context, a case of Cicero calling things as he sees them? It is hard to tell without knowing more about the interactions between the two friends; this means knowing what happened when they were not writing letters but actually in each other's company. The letters do give us much more

¹ Jerome Neu, *Sticks and Stones: The Philosophy of Insults* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), vii. Though Neu does use historical citations to illustrate some of his theories, Cicero is never mentioned in his illustrations.

² Cicero, *Selected Letters*, trans. P.G. Walsh (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), Letter 30 pg 69.

information on the relationship between the two men, but still fall short in most cases of being able to tell us definitively about inside jokes and references to private moments the two men shared. The vagueness and failure on my part to recognize these types of insults funnels the focus on to Cicero's use of clearly recognizable insults which are abundant. It is with these insults that we can more easily break down and analyze the psychology and philosophy behind them. As I alluded to in the introduction, this analysis will demonstrate that Cicero's insults follow common patterns that still exist today and undoubtedly were present throughout the different social classes of the late Republic.

The first case study that will be discussed is Cicero's treatment of the Law court in his written version of *Against Verres*, a recollection of his speeches given during his prosecution of the former Sicilian governor accused of corruption and extortion in 70 BC.³ Not only does Cicero insult the accused, but more importantly, certainly for the career of Cicero, was his boldness in challenging the law system in general. Within the first few minutes of his prosecution Cicero grabs the attention of the court by blatantly referring to its corruption as being an embedded characteristic. He states, "For you have been given the unique chance to make your Senatorial Order less unpopular, and to set right the damaged reputation of these courts."⁴ And just a few lines later: "To increase the unpopularity of your Order is very far from my intention. On the contrary, I am eager to remove your bad reputation – which is as much mine as yours."⁵ He continues with similar insults in what seems to be an effort to moralize his case. Before we go further, an analysis of this last quotation is in order. It is clear that Cicero's assertion that the court is unpopular is a mechanism to create a moralistic dichotomy. One can still find this kind of abuse today. For example, in his speech of September 20, 2001 in front of a special joint session of Congress, President George W. Bush created a moralistic dichotomy when he proclaimed, "Every nation, in every region, now has a decision to make. Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists."⁶ Despite the president's avoidance of a direct insult, although an insult is implied to anyone that disagrees, this statement works in much the same way as Cicero's. Cicero is saying that if the senators are not supportive of him, they by default are supporters of corruption and dishonesty. The insults of Cicero that will be discussed further in this work will also contain an element of this kind as he creates a high ground and then seeks to convince others of his rightness. What is important here as we look at Cicero as a representative of insult in his time is that the mechanism he used in the case against Verres to establish a moralistic advantage was not something he invented. Rather, it was his boldness and skill in placing these insults, in other words, his skillful rhetoric, that gained him the desired results. By challenging his fellow senators, with insults to their honor, and compiling evidence that would have made an acquittal an even larger insult to their honor. Cicero won the case

³ From Michael Grant's introduction to: Cicero, *Selected Works*, trans. M. Grant (London: Penguin Books, 1971), 35.

⁴ Ibid., 37.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ From the Speech of George W. Bush, "Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People," *The White House: President George W. Bush*, <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010920-8.html>.

against Verres, defeated the defense of Quintus Hortensius⁷ and took one of his first steps toward eternal fame.

While Cicero's use of insults against his fellow senators in a court of law served a purpose in gaining political influence and legal cases, his use of personal insults that one can find in his letters and his written treatises cannot be spun to hold such high minded intentions. Cicero realized, as others have in all ages, that in order for an insult to sting, it must be understood. *Against Verres* and the *Philippics*⁸ against Mark Antony are full of gritty, lewd, and emasculating insults directed toward targets with the intension of eliciting a response not only from the targets, but from the public as well. The evidence from Cicero's letters proves to us that influencing public opinion was not his sole purpose for insulting his enemies; he truly had a deep personal hatred for them. While the insults Cicero lets fly in *Against Verres* and the *Philippics* show his personal hatred by sheer brute force, the examples of insults from his letters which are almost entirely at Antony's expense after 44 BC might indicate more than personal hatred by their strong nature, but also his attempt at encouraging actual harm to Antony. For example, the letter to Trebonius which Cicero describes his discontent with the state of affairs after Caesar's death:

How I wish that you had invited me to that most attractive feast on the Ides of March! We would have had no left-overs.⁹ But as things stand, the left-overs have caused such complications! That sacred service you rendered to the state is arousing some complaints. Indeed, since you, excellent man that you are, took that plague-ridden man aside¹⁰ and through your kindness he is still alive, this induces me from time to time to feel irritated with you (an attitude verging on impiety), for you have bequeathed to me more troubles than to all the others.¹¹

This particular example is an echo of another letter that Cicero wrote to another conspirator, Cassius, in which similar language is used to describe Antony. It is clear that there is no intension of insulting Antony personally for the obvious reason that the letter was not addressed to him. Therefore it seems logical to conclude that his uses of these insults within this passage are used to emphatically put a stamp of approval on an assumption that Antony should have been killed. Though Cicero saw Antony's death as necessary in a political sense, the insults he uses here and in his *Philippics* seem to indicate a personal hatred that contrasted sharply with a man that believed, "in so far as we can serve our interests without harming anyone else, we should do so."¹² There is evidence throughout recorded history of this sort of use of insults in such a way as Cicero uses in his letters to influence opinions in the hope of seeing someone toppled. Jean-Paul Marat used *Le Journal de la République Française* to insult and influence, as do talk radio hosts like Rush Limbaugh today. It is apparent again that Cicero is not stepping outside the bounds of

⁷ According to Grant, Quintus Hortensius (114-50 BC) was "the most distinguished orator of the day" and "got a name for high living and dishonest earnings..." From Michael Grant's introduction to *Against Verres*. Cicero, *Selected Works*, 36.

⁸ *Against Verres* and the *Second Philippic Against Antony* are contained within the collection translated by Michael Grant: *Cicero: Selected Works*.

⁹ Walsh's note: "there would have been nothing left over!": Cicero sounds his now ritual lament that Antony had been allowed to escape death." Cicero, *Letters*, 346.

¹⁰ Walsh's note: "Trebonius was credited with saving Antony's life by diverting him when the conspirators encircled Caesar. See *Philippics* 2.34, 3.22; Plutarch, *Brutus* 17." Ibid., 347.

¹¹ Ibid., lt. 155 pg. 254.

¹² From "On Duties" 6 III. Cicero, *Works*, 174.

human nature in regards to insults; he instead seems to come out of this particular examination as acting in a manner that history would judge as beneath a man of his stature. This section and the next argues that even if Cicero thought of himself as above common insults, he realized that to be effective in his time, he had to drop into the level of his audience.

So far, only a handful of Cicero's insults have been discussed, this section will look at examples of his insults written as if they were said to the target and this is how they shall be treated since the other intentions have already been scrutinized above. *Against Verres* and the *Second Philippic against Antony* are the gold mines of Ciceronian insults and they range from the somewhat clever to the simple name calling variety. Look at this example of one of his clever set ups and knock downs from the *Second Philippic*: "And Marcus Porcius Cato felt the same as those of consular rank: he too praised my activities as consul. Your [Antony's] consulship, on the other hand, was the worst of the many things which death spared Cato."¹³ Another example that harkens back to an earlier section is this excerpt from *Against Verres* where he further insults the court ruthlessly: "Besides, would Verres ever have been so optimistic unless he, too, had absorbed this same deplorable opinion concerning yourselves?"¹⁴ His evident agreement with this view ought "if possible" to make you hate him even more than other Romans do: seeing that in greed, criminality, and perjury he regards you as his equals."¹⁵ Again, Cicero's way with rhetoric has an effect on us, as it did his own audiences, of drawing a gasp. So do these clever set ups followed by bold and swift conclusions mean that Cicero cannot be a representative for late Republican Rome? It should not be a surprise that the answer is no. Finding creative ways to destroy your opponent's credibility or ethos is part of the training for any student trained in rhetoric in Cicero's time as it has been up to the modern era.

As was noted before, Cicero's arsenal of insults included the weapon of name calling. His particular use of name calling fits well within a narrow set of topics: drunkenness, debauchery, and incompetence. All three of these topics are commonly covered not only in his own time, but throughout the Western tradition. The reader would probably agree that an example of name calling from other points in history is unnecessary. Here is a list of examples Cicero uses when he resorts to name calling; note that all of these examples are in reference to Mark Antony: "fool", "gladiator", "imbecile", "masterly speaker"¹⁶, "sheep", "rogue!", "prostitute", "debauchee", "brainless", and many other variations on these themes.¹⁷ These devices which Cicero used changed very little from the earlier days of his career. In examples from *Against Verres*, the only difference that can be discerned is that Cicero liked to do his name calling exclusively with adjectives in 70 BC, while Cicero in October of 44 BC lets some of his insults stand as single words like "fool", "imbecile", and "sheep." This hardly seems like a point to belabor as the name calling he uses in both periods is essentially the same. Though these

¹³ Cicero, *Works*, 108

¹⁴ Here Cicero is referring to his statements that the extortion laws the senate maintained at the time were constructed in such a way as to make it easy for governors to exploit their provinces not only for themselves but for whoever they needed to pay off or give favors to. Ibid., 52.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ "So our masterly speaker here does not realize he is praising the man he is trying to attack, and is abusing those who sit here listening to him!" Sarcasm is also a part of Cicero's arsenal. Cicero, *Works*, 110.

¹⁷ All of these examples are taken from Cicero's *Second Philippic against Antony* as found in *Works*. All of the examples used with the exception of "masterly speaker" are recurrent within the text.

names directed at his enemies had a sting by themselves, the fact that Cicero uses them in such a public situation as a court or on the senate floor is what really makes them deadly.

Unfortunately for Cicero of course was that his insults of Antony were literally deadly for him, not Antony. Grant gives us a hint of Antony's reaction to the first *Philippic* in his introduction to the 2nd: "On 2 September Cicero attended the Senate and delivered the First Philippic. This was couched in fairly moderate terms, but earned a savage reply from Antony, 'who as usual' says Cicero, 'seemed to be spewing rather than speaking'"¹⁸ This along with Antony's ultimate reaction demonstrates how seriously Cicero's insults were taken. The escalation into physical violence is a topic Neu examines, he states, "What is of special interest, in terms of understanding the nature and various functions of the insults, is what precisely marks the difference between an acceptable insult within the ritual and words that amount to an actual assault, that get taken personally, despite the cover of the conventions."¹⁹ What this amounts to is that Cicero is not merely insulting Antony in his *Philippics* but using his words to attack him in a way that Antony, being guilty of owning some of Cicero's insults, counters with violence in the form of being added to a proscription list. Is Cicero alone in the historical record when it comes to having insults met with blood? The answer is of course "no" again. Neu's example involves Norman Mailer and Gore Vidal at a party where Mailer punched Vidal in the face for making an insult about his book.²⁰ Though, Mailer did not have Vidal killed as a result of this exchange of words and fist, the basic idea that malicious insults are a form of attack just as affective or even more so than actual physical violence is clear. Cicero's use of insults proves that he was a skilled enough warrior with words to provoke the ultimate reaction, but not a unique reaction that *only* Cicero could elicit.

It is not my purpose nor should it ever be anyone's purpose to argue that Cicero was unexceptional. Even if his work had not survived the ravages of time, references to him would have established him as a person of note among the tumultuous times in which he lived. Whether by historical accident or that he was just *that highly* regarded, a large body of his work managed to survive and create the legendary persona: the most highly regarded king of Latin literature who influences every facet of the broad study we refer to as the humanities. If Beethoven's music is among the information which represents humanity contained on the golden record aboard Voyagers 1 & 2, then surely Cicero's Latin should have a place on that record as well. While still thinking of space, can it be assumed that Cicero was an alien, and therefore not a product of his age. I hope I do not have to answer that question for all his importance and stature in the history books, Cicero was still one of many players in the political game at Rome in the 1st century BC. His writings clearly show that he set boundaries for himself and for the most part played within the rules of the day.²¹ Scholars point to Cicero as being the pinnacle of rhetoric, Latin, and so forth in his day, and perhaps he was the master of insult and had he lived he could have written a celebrated treatise called *On Insults*. Even if this were what happened, it logically would not give us reason to believe that Cicero was playing in a different sandbox than his contemporaries. In fact, if he had written it, it might have been recognized as the best representation of insult in his time. Overall, from the limited sources, an argument of logic and

¹⁸ Grant from: Cicero, *Works*, 101.

¹⁹ Neu, *Sticks and Stones*, 57.

²⁰ Ibid., 58.

²¹ Cicero's exile and death are evidence that the "rules" were subject to rapid change as they are in all historical periods.

reason will have to be sufficient. Without doing an extensive comparison with the works of other authors in this period, compounded with a complete lack of intact writing from a spectrum of other social classes, we are left with little choice but to view the examples Cicero used and compare them with examples from other time periods. The conclusion is that, despite the changes in language that have taken place over the last 2000 years, the basic intent and structure has changed very little, giving us hope that we can have a better understanding of insults in Cicero's time by examining his work alone.

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